

Harvest of Dissent: the National Farmers Union and the Early Cold War

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1999 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"Harvest of Dissent: the National Farmers Union and the Early Cold War." *The Annals of Iowa* 58 (1999), 329-331.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10274>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

was successful in controlling costs, and was a master of detail in every aspect of his operations. To Kriss, farming was a business, not a way of life. In fact, he lived in Colby and managed farming operations on thousands of acres from his office. But he was also a hands-on manager who traveled to the farm locations regularly to see firsthand how operations were going.

By the 1940s good crops and better prices were making Kriss a rich man. In 1946 Kriss managed 100,000 acres for Garvey in Kansas and eastern Colorado, of which about 50,000 acres were in wheat. He harvested 600,000 bushels that year and 1.2 million in 1947 on Garvey and Kriss lands. On his own land he produced more than 300,000 bushels in 1947 that brought over \$2 a bushel. Kriss, who had started out as a farm laborer some fifteen years earlier, was now a millionaire, and more. John Kriss and his sons continued to farm on a large scale during the rest of the century.

This is a first-rate book. It is well written and based on a wide array of records, including the correspondence between Garvey and Kriss. Miner also had several interviews with Kriss before his death in 1996. The combined personal and documentary sources make a solid base for a book that should correct some of the doomsday writing about the Great Plains. Craig Miner has established himself as a top authority on the region with his earlier volume, *West of Wichita*, and now *Harvesting the Great Plains*.

Harvest of Dissent: The National Farmers Union and the Early Cold War, by Bruce E. Field. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998. x, 244 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DUNCAN STEWART, STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

In 1946 the National Farmers Union (FU) was smaller than the Grange or the Farm Bureau, but as the self-proclaimed voice of America's small farmers it had an influential place in the Roosevelt coalition. After World War II, the FU urged President Truman to strengthen FDR's agricultural and social policies and to continue cooperation with the United Nations allies. FU president James Patton condemned Truman's cuts in agriculture programs and his collusion with big business to assert American power abroad. By 1948, after the collapse of Henry Wallace's independent presidential campaign and amid growing anticommunist paranoia, Patton began to rethink the FU's criticism of American policy.

Bruce Field's *Harvest of Dissent* details the struggle within the FU over its political direction and Patton's effort to find a place in the ever narrower ideological spectrum of Cold War America. The author culls his narrative from the papers of FU officials and national political figures, contemporary news accounts, readings on Cold War diplomacy and the national security state, and interviews with surviving participants.

At the heart of the story is the conflict between James Patton and Fred Stover, president of the Iowa Farmers Union (IFU). Above all, Patton wanted to preserve the influence and viability of the FU in the face of the Red Scare, while Stover championed traditional FU views on international cooperation and support for the New Deal. Both men believed that they were carrying out the FU's mission to protect America's small farmers and to promote peace and free trade. Field writes, "while the anticommunist hysteria of the early Cold War years pushed Patton toward the defensive tactic of preservation and political survival, it reinforced in Stover his conviction that continued criticism of U.S. policy was a necessary step if America's small farmers were ever going to rise from the bottom of the nation's economic ladder" (81).

Field follows the Patton-Stover clash chronologically, while establishing the political context of the debate and analyzing the Korean War's economic and ideological influence on the FU. At first, the FU president tried to silence Stover from within the organization. After the war began, Patton distanced himself publicly from Stover and supported anti-Stover insurgents in Iowa. In 1952 Patton and his allies changed FU rules to allow the suspension of uncooperative state units, and in 1954 Stover's IFU lost its charter.

Stover and his Iowa followers tried to keep control of the IFU, but lost a court fight over the use of the "Farmers Union" name. After 1957, they soldiered on as the United States Farmers Association. Stover himself remained critical of Cold War policies, opposed the Vietnam War, cheered the New Left, and warned of the impending Iowa farm crisis of the 1980s. James Patton's efforts to preserve the influence and vitality of the FU came to naught. He was unable to counter the public view of the FU as a procommunist group, and the FU's liberal ideas had little influence on the Eisenhower administration.

Bruce Field more than fulfills the goals he outlines in his introduction. *Harvest of Dissent* is a well-written addition to the history of the FU; it discusses in detail the impact of the Korean War on American farmers, and the battles that the war caused inside the Farmers Union. Field is at his best when he recreates "the mental world of the

Farmers Union between 1945 and 1954" so that the reader can evaluate the actions of Patton and Stover as rational responses to the world in which they lived. He argues persuasively that "when Farmers Union members criticized programs like the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO, they did so . . . in a reasonably moderate tone that did not express any preference for communism or any desire to see Soviet flags flying over the nation's Capitol. They appeared, in short, to want to widen the scope of political dialogue in the nation and to offer alternatives to what seemed to them an excessively limited list of options"(6). Unfortunately, as I. F. Stone wrote of such ideas in his 1952 *Hidden History of the Korean War* (34), by 1950 "they had been made to seem naive, outmoded, and dangerous—if not downright subversive."

Harvest of Dissent documents the political price American society paid for declaring that even moderate dissent was akin to betrayal. Fred Stover was hounded out of the FU, watched by the FBI, and marginalized for his views. Not even James Patton's conversion to the true faith of anticommunism was enough to atone for the original sins of the FU. The National Farmers Union lost influence throughout the 1950s and remained a favorite target of anticommunists.

From an Iowa perspective, Field's work reminds us of the mixed legacy of agrarian radicalism in the state. Iowans Henry A. Wallace and Fred Stover offered an alternative vision of American policy and took part in the postwar political debate only to be condemned as "fellow travelers." The national anticommunist crusade all but silenced Stover as a champion of Iowa's small farmers and eliminated the IFU as a political force. Yet Stover's warnings about the "unholy alliance" of business and government remain salient today, in an era of corporate hog farming, collapsing grain prices, and a new round of farmers leaving the land.

Complete in All Its Parts: Nursing Education at the University of Iowa, 1898–1998, by Lee Anderson and Kathy Penningroth. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998. xi, 308 pp. Illustrations, tables, notes, appendixes, index. \$39.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PHILIP L. FRANA, IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

The history of American nursing is today blossoming in the hands of professional historians. The discipline has found controversy, the kind that generates an audience and constructive debate, in the issues of nurses' authority as more (or less) than "the physician's hand," and

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.